

Take on Board

Transcript – Melanie Ho



Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'm speaking with Melanie Ho about gender equity and the board CEO relationship. First, let me tell you about Melanie. Melanie's first board was as a 27 year old graduate student in 2006, when she chaired the board of directors for the Associated Students at UCLA, a \$75 million campus business with 1300 employees. And I think she's going to tell us a bit more about that at some stage soon. Today, Melanie is the author of "Beyond Leaning In: gender equity and what organizations are up against" a unique award winning business book written as a novel. Beyond Leaning In explores a wide range of professional dynamics in a fictionalized company, including between the CEO Deborah and her board chair George. Melanie is also a leadership consultant, and speaker. Melanie is also a leadership consultant and speaker focused on future visioning, leadership development, and diversity, equity and inclusion. Welcome to the take on board podcast.

Melanie Ho 0:52

Melanie, thanks so much for having me today.

Helga Svendsen 0:55

Oh, I can't wait to hear more about this book. But before we go there, I and before we talk about Deborah and George, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Can you tell me a story about young Melanie that tells us a bit about how you got to where you are today.

Melanie Ho 1:09

I think one of the key moments for me was when I was age 12. And I used to think of this as a turning point that I've actually now started to think of it as a time when my interests started to collide for the first time in a good way. And I in the seventh grade, I loved art class, I was the set designer for our school play, I loved painting drawing during the holiday season, the art club, we go paint the windows at the local shopping center, with carols and snow families and things like that. And it was a lot of fun. And I just loved art. That was how I spent a lot of my time. And at the time at school, we had the period called elective, where you can choose what you want to do with it. And I had picked art in the seventh grade. And in eighth grade, I thought I would continue doing art. But my friends were running for student government and they were running on a ticket together and they had no one running for secretary. And I said I can't do that. Because I would then have to give up my art

class to be in student government. And it was like a conspiracy. My friends told the teacher the teacher told my parents and they all felt like I was a little bit shy and that I really need to get out of my shell and do student government. And so I had my friends, my teacher, my parents all convincing me to run for student body secretary. And I don't think I would have if I hadn't had the experience. I ended up being in student government in the eighth grade, the ninth grade 10th grade 11th grade, throughout college throughout graduate school, and I never would have really pursued those leadership experiences had my friends didn't push me. And while I thought that I was almost giving up art, and years later, I would think oh, well, that was the moment where I spent less time with art. Later on in life, I started to incorporate these interests more. And so my book Beyond Leaning In, its business book, but it's actually written as a novel based on my love of fiction. I actually got a PhD in literature. I draw comics about feminism and diversity, equity and inclusion. And we're going to use those comics to lead workshops. And so I used to think of these things in separate I had to decide did I love art, and I love leadership. But it's been fun finding a way to bring them together.

Helga Svendsen 3:04

Oh my god, that is so awesome. I was thinking as you were telling the story, that it's no surprise that you ended up writing a fictional book about business topics, which is exactly as you've said, you know, it's letting your creativity shine in that way. But he's fantastic. And I love your comics, are they? Are we able to see them somewhere? Are they? Are they online somewhere? Are you able to share? Because I would love to have a look there as well.

Melanie Ho 3:26

They are online. They are on my instagram at MelanieHo13. Also on my website, we can put that all in the show notes. www.melanieho.com. Yeah, so I've drawn, I think over 40 comics now about the workplace. And I think they're just a fun way to talk about serious issues.

Helga Svendsen 3:42

Oh my god, that is fantastic. We will definitely put that in the show notes. And folks, you might have heard her just casually say, oh, we'll put that in the show notes. That's because Melanie's a podcaster too. She knows how all of this works, which is fabulous. Oh, that is great. And as soon as we're done here, I'm going to have a look. I love that creative streak and being able to bring the leadership in as well. And I also loved hearing in there that your friends gave you a little nudge along as well, which is often what we need to join a board basically. So you were first on your school council or student body, whatever it may have been at school. And then I mentioned this in the intro. You were also on the UCLA student association. I think you chaired that as well.

Melanie Ho 4:20

This is a really fascinating organization is called associate students UCLA or as UCLA for short. And when I think of student government, I think this is a model of what student leadership can be. It is a 13 member board, eight of whom are students. The chair of the board and the chair of the committees are all students, and they have the power and the authority of a full fledged corporate board. This is a \$75 million business that included the trademarks and licensing students store merchandise, bookstores, a dozen or so campus restaurants at UCLA which is the largest of the University of California schools in terms of student body size, so really a huge business 13 How entered employees, most of them students, but a few 100 of those professional staff. And this group of students hire review, they set the salary for the CEO. They approve the budget, multimillion dollar capital expenditures, they work with the management team and set strategy. And so it's really just a phenomenal experience for students who, as they're learning have this opportunity to contribute back to their school. But really to gain an experience running, there are many colleges and universities that are smaller than \$75 million business. And so it was just for me a crash course in leadership, governance challenge of balancing mission and business.

Helga Svendsen 5:38

Amazing. And, you know, we just heard earlier that you got a little nudge along from your friends for the school council, how did you end up as chair of what's it called as UCLA? Yeah. How did you end up chair there? Was it managing? Or did you put your hand up yourself for this one?

Melanie Ho 5:51

Yeah, that also was similarly a friend who said to me, I think he would be great on this, she was actually an outgoing board member. Okay.

Helga Svendsen 5:57

We often hear that school councils, student associations, are the precursor to other boards. And it sounds like that is definitely the case here. And I, as I say, I love the creativity streak in there as well. So let's turn there now, like our topic for today is about gender equity in the board CEO relationship. And as you said, just before, you explored that through writing a story about Deborah, the CEO, and George, the chair of the board, give us an introduction to the book and some of the themes that are explored there.

Melanie Ho 6:27

So the meaning and gender equity and what organizations are up against, again, it's a business book, you'll find it in the business, the Women's Studies at the Social Sciences section of the bookstore,

but I felt like it was really important to tell it as a novel. So we visit a fictional company, we go back and forth between the perspective of different characters who work at this fictional company. And they're both men and women. And they're at different levels of the organizational chart. And I hope that that gives a sense of the complexity of the problem. And a lot of that complexity is shown through Deborah, who is one of the main characters and her chair George, the book begins with Deborah facing a little bit of a mystery. She is someone who has smashed glass ceilings, to get to the top of a tech company, as its CEO, also one of the founders, she has been a wonderful mentor to many women across her career. And so she's a little bit puzzled, the book actually starts with her chief product officer, Natalie giving her notice, and not really explaining why. And Deborah has seen this trend that a number of the women at senior positions are quitting at higher rates than men. And they do an engagement survey where at a certain level of leadership, the women are actually also less engaged than the men in the company overall. And as somebody who really believes in gender equity and has worked hard to support woman, she's puzzled. But she is starting to get a sense that the rising generation of women leaders, Deborah is a baby boomer, the rising generation of women leaders at her company are largely at the tail end of Generation X, or the the older millennials. And she gets the sense, there's something that she's missing, and that they are biting their tongues when it comes to it. And so the book begins with her feeling this sort of call to action, what she going to do about this, she puts it on her list of goals for the year. And she and her CFO and Co Co founder Jack have a lunch where they discuss these with George their board chair. This is where the beginning of how we see their relationship unfold, and how George ends up steadily undermining a lot of her efforts unintentionally. And he looks at this list and he says we've got too much to do sales are down right now. You're doing a new systems implementation, there's a lot going on, I don't want the leadership team spending time trying to figure out the gender engagement and retention problem. You're a great CEO, as a woman, Deborah, you're doing a good job, you've won a lot of awards, it's a great place to work for women.

So you know, let's have a speaker series. And he really begins this denial of Deborah and the leadership team at the beginning of the book about the problem. He's sort of happy with PR metrics and optics and doesn't really see the urgency, and so pushes her to not spend time there.

Helga Svendsen 9:00

Interesting. You know, thinking about boards in that way. So I'm putting it back into the advice for boards in a way. Well, a if you're seeing these metrics, if you're seeing there is higher turnover amongst women, whether it's senior or otherwise, if the engagement is showing up, that women are more disengaged, less engaged in the organization, do something about it, not just the speaker series and not just the optics. And particularly, I think what I'm hearing there is if Deborah, if your CEO is raising these issues, then listen and do something about it.

Yeah, absolutely. Interesting. Okay. And so with, with George, I was gonna say Do you think he it's like he's a real person in a way and in some ways he is I guess, because he's the character is probably an amalgam of a whole number of different characters.

Melanie Ho 9:48

All the characters in my book are kind of an amalgam of many, many stories. I've heard from many women across lots of different industries.

Helga Svendsen 9:56

So he's George, you know, and we've all come across people like George is In this instance is George, is it deliberate? Or is it naive? I guess? And either way, what's your advice to either the CEOs or the other board members? You know, my punt is, there would be other board members who also see the chair of that board who is, like I say, either naively or deliberately downplaying an issue. What's your advice to them in influencing that chair influencing George, in having a light shone on these issues in a meaningful way?

Melanie Ho 10:29

It's such a hard thing. And I listened to one of your episodes earlier, where you talk about how the board chair doesn't often have the accountability that anyone else says who actually holds the board chair accountable. And part of the problem in the book we see with George, which is something again, based on many stories I've heard is that he throws himself into micromanaging a bit. Yeah, he shouldn't be directing Deborah on something at this level. And generally, across the book, we see him he's dealing with a lot going on in his personal life, where work, he's retired and working on this board becomes sort of His purpose, His way of dealing with some of the challenges of his retirement and his changing family situation and a whole lot of things where I think there's a lot that boards can do in terms of training and onboarding, both for all board members and for leaders to help really define that role. I think that often we think that we're talking about those issues as boards, but we can't do it often enough, probably. So I think that's part of it, Deborah, or someone probably needed to have a hard conversation. The other issue with George is that he is really focused on quick wins, and he's impatient, and he doesn't want anything to take too long. So part of why He's resisting Debra's desire to get into the challenge. Why are women less engaged is because it's a lot faster, to just have a leadership speaking series for the women. And we see that throughout the book, where there are other ways that he undermines gender because of speed. So for example, when they need to hire a new chief product officer to replace the woman that's left, this is unintentional bias, where he and the CFO play squash with a less qualified male and female candidate, and he ended up the chief product officer. And apparently, it's a decision where it's just faster for them to put in this guy that they already know so well from playing squash. And so I think that one thing that boards can do, and it CEOs and senior management can work with boards on is really ensuring that they are focused on the right metrics. There's obviously personal issues with George that probably someone needs to

have difficult conversations about he shouldn't be micromanaging. He is participating in group favoritism and putting in his squash buddy into the role. But there's also a way to look at it and have the conversation where George is optimizing towards what's faster all the time, instead of what's long term, correct?

Helga Svendsen 12:34

Yeah, yeah, that long term sustainability or that long term? Thriving, I guess, in an organization isn't often not just about those quick wins. You talked earlier about looking at the right metrics, what would you say boards should be looking at? What are the right metrics for boards to be looking at in this way?

So I think there's overall metrics. And then there's probably just the culture of metrics when it comes to day to day decisions and the culture of quick wins in terms of overall metrics. I think that boards need to get beyond representation, right? We're used to looking at things like percentage of women or people of color, other underrepresented groups on the board on the senior leadership team, and then we kind of call it a day, that doesn't take into account that well, first of all, we have a long way to go at representation. But that representation doesn't necessarily mean equity or inclusion. So if we look across the team and across board members, how is engagement? How is participation? How is attendance at board meetings or for leadership staff? How is their engagement? What are the promotion rates, as we look at different levels across the organization, as we look at different types of jobs are women always being funneled into certain positions, and men are always being funneled into the positions that more likely lead to the top roles, I think that it's so easy just to look at the easy metrics, instead of looking at all of the hard ones, and just the combination of them and how they they kind of create a system. And then I think there's just sort of the day to day, maybe these aren't metrics that are on the dashboard that's looked at on a regular basis, but on how we evaluate decisions. For example, in the case we see in the books, hiring somebody faster, might lead to better results for the bottom line sooner hiring someone slower is actually going to slow that down. And I think boards are always looking at money faster, rather than realizing we have a case in the book where that happens. And actually it slows down sales later on down the line. Right? Not the right person. And so some of it is trying to figure out, Okay, how are we gauging short and long term? And then some of it is even day to day? Are we putting pressure on leaders to fill positions quickly? Because we think that that's better, when actually the slower and correct hire is going to be better for the numbers down the line? And it's so interesting, isn't it this balance between short and long term? I mean, in some ways, I would say it's the board's role to always look longer term. Yes.

Even if there is you know, that's, in some ways it's management. I would think that a normally doing the hustle on the short term stuff on the board's like, okay, let's think of the big picture, the long term picture, the long term stewardship of this organization and what's going to be best to there. That's what I would hope boards are doing is really encouraging that long term thinking

Melanie Ho 15:00

Yep, and thinking about, hey, maybe we'll grow 10% This year instead of 15%. And some of that time that we would have spent will be on ensuring that we have our culture in place. And that will turn about diversity, equity and inclusion for real not for optics and trusting that that will be better for the business in the long term. Okay, maybe even saying 10% instead of 15% is okay. That's sacrilegious to many. Yeah. Well, that's right. Yeah. What's enough, really, and what's sustainable as well, sometimes that really, meteoric growth doesn't lead to those sustainable long term outcomes.

Helga Svendsen 15:36

Interesting. Okay. So some of the, I think what I'm hearing there, some of the warning signs, I guess, are the red flags for boards to watch out for are things like higher turnover, particularly amongst a particular demographic group, in this instance, gender, and probably age as well, because I think I heard that, that Deborah was a baby boomer, and everybody else was Gen X, or maybe even millennials. So keeping an eye out for those turnover rates, keeping an eye out for engagement, and then really digging below the surface of what some of those things might mean, and thinking about the long term, sustainable solutions for those sorts of things. Yeah, exactly. swinging back to this challenge, this conundrum, of when the chair really wants to, you know, work on either the short term or has other things, or color or movement over here, let's do the speaker series, whatever it may be, you know, Deborah, as the CEO could have that difficult conversation, but I gotta say, I think that's really difficult for a CEO who reports to the board through the chair, to be able to do that. What about for the board itself, I don't know if the other members of the board make an appearance in the book and what they do, or whether you've just got some advice for those other board members, how do they tackle this and ask the right questions and pull the right levers for meaningful change.

Melanie Ho 16:51

So they don't make another they don't make an appearance in my book. Although in my book, George has a very good relationship with the CFO of the company, Jack, who is Deborah's co founder, actually, and Jack plays squash with George, and we see some of the dynamics there were for a female CEO, her male CFO and her male Board Chair having a relationship that she doesn't have access to. So I think board members can always be aware of those kinds of dynamics as they think about the board as a whole and management as a whole. And whether some of the things that are occurring outside of the boardroom, right then lay into how the organization is governed and led, I think for boards themselves, ensuring that they have an environment of psychological safety. And this is something that hopefully board chairs really focus on, but that any board member, especially board members with more tenure can propose is something that the boards really participate in. And there are just so many great psychological safety articles and books and trainings about how to ensure that there is a culture where people feel like they can raise ideas, and often conflicting ideas without retribution.

Helga Svendsen 17:54

Yes, it makes such a difference, doesn't it to feel that can raise these things, even potentially, for the CEO of the organization. You know, we talked before about some of those power dynamics, they are in a way that she reports to the board, that He is the chair. But if there really is true psychological safety, then she may well be able to raise some of these issues as well. Although I'm not sure there is real psychological safety, if some of these short term kind of window dressing options are being suggested. Or it's such a challenge. But I love in a way that you've presented it as this fictional book and fictional characters that are amalgam of all sorts of characters that we've all met before. You know, I think about this podcast, sometimes some of the most challenging issues that directors are dealing with that they might talk to me about offline. I'm like, Oh, that's amazing. Would you be able to share in there like no way, I can't share that publicly. Because it's too big a challenge, or even opportunities, or there's relationships or whatever it may be, you know, if this were, if George and Deborah, were not fictionalized characters, and if the other people on the board, if I don't know, Mary was on the board and witnessing some of this, and I was talking to Mary, Mary probably wouldn't talk about this on the podcast, because of some of the sensitive relationships. So I love that there is this fictional character that we can bring some of these stories to light with as well. In that way, it's a really helpful way, as well as, you know, your own incredible creativity and bringing that together as well.

Melanie Ho 19:13

My hope is that it D personalizes it a little bit. And that's also with the comics, I actually have people in my workshops draw themselves, I think that anybody can draw, we don't need to create art, just you give people a marker or crayon and just even drawing a stick figure is a way to depersonalized these complicated issues.

Helga Svendsen 19:29

Absolutely. I love that. And there is something about just the tactile, you know, picking up the textures or the pens, there is something about that, that. I don't know, it gets the brain working in different ways, I think as well. So it's a great thing to do. I'm definitely looking them up as soon as we've finished this conversation. What's your next book? Have you got that on the horizon?

Melanie Ho 19:46

Oh, gosh, I am someone who always is sort of halfway finished with a lot of different things. Or some some of them a one a one a is to have finished? I guess I'm working actually on a few screenplays based on some of the concepts in my book and just trying to thank you have ways to talk about gender and racial equity. And then I've been doing a workshop for some organizations, and I'm contemplating how to turn it into a book. And it's about this idea of again, how do you heading depersonalized some of the challenges around change management and difficult issues at work. And

so it's about all of the characters that we all have inside our heads that respond to change. And I've been thinking about drawing comics to really bring these characters to life, but that we all have inside ourselves a analyzer, who is picking and looking for systems, processes, policies, incentives, why something is not going to work. And the analyzer can really subvert change, but actually also has important information for us to really know, they know where the landmines are going to be. And we all have within us a self Protector, who is worried about where we're vulnerable. And that could be losing our job. But it also could be just losing our status or being embarrassed. And we all have within us a guardian, who is really focused on the past. And even for positive changes, worried about what's going to be lost. And we all have within us a compass that actually is focused on true north and the positive parts of change. And so I've been working with some leadership teams on just for any big change, recognizing that we've got, we've all got these characters inside our head, even if we all lean one way versus another. Everyone has all four of them. And so how do we kind of befriend them? And make the most of them?

Helga Svendsen 21:21

You know, again, I'm thinking about the boardroom, how do you have all of those characters in the boardroom as well, because they are all incredibly valuable. Bringing together those different perspectives. That's exactly what a strong board shouldn't be doing is bringing together those different perspectives and different views and different lenses through which things are seen.

Melanie Ho 21:37

And having everyone realized the one that's dominant for them. I worked a lot in higher education and with many university boards, and there's a lot of board members who within them, that Guardian I talked about, that's preserving the past, and they want their university to be the same university it was when they went to college there. And so they're kind of anchoring on their 20 year old self. Yeah, and the universities got to change in all kinds of ways, expand a different way serve new audiences. And I've watched a lot of them really have a hard time grappling with that, because they can look at all the market data in the world, you can give them text and active information. And yet they kind of keep anchoring on the 20 year old self. Yes, absolutely, yes. But we'll see that I think in the boardroom as well.

Helga Svendsen 22:21

Oh, Melanie, I love this idea of using fictional, consolidated characters to explore gender equity and to explore some of these challenges. What are some of the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Melanie Ho 22:34

So first, the fact that representation is only one part of the diversity, equity and inclusion challenge that having numbers we definitely want to get there, but that is not enough. Second, I'm often asked what the number one takeaway is from my book. And it's interesting, because readers always tell me what their takeaways are, and they're very diverse, and sometimes not things I realized, would be a top takeaway. But the one thing I really hope everyone takes away and that we've talked about a lot throughout this episode, is the problem with over focusing on the short term, I think of it as organizational impatience, and quick wins, and that we live in this culture that is all about speed, and getting through everything on our checklist as fast as possible. And I think that that's often what gets in the way of Gender Equity and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion more broadly. And I think because then we discussed earlier, the goal of the board, the purpose of the board is largely to preserve that long term, that this is an area where boards can really give permission to leadership to think and talk more and, and work on metrics that are balancing that short and long term. And then third, just the use of fiction and arts to help depersonalized these really difficult discussions is something that I'm personally passionate about and encourage others to look at as well. I think there's a lot of robust literature out there on just different ways that organizations can use fiction and art to think in new ways. There are boards, for example, that do science fiction and comic book artists. That's something I've done with some groups that I just love doing. And I think that especially now when we're all feeling a lot of fatigue, change, fatigue, fatigue with just the general world right now. My hope is that organizations will look for just creative ways to get unstuck.

Helga Svendsen 24:21

Yeah, fantastic. There is that creativity actually, just checking. Are you on any boards at the moment?

Melanie Ho 24:27

I'm not at the moment,

Helga Svendsen 24:28

My little prompt, I'm always prompting good women to get on the boardroom. I think some of these, you know, we're thinking about a different personas in the boardroom and that creative thinking is so important. Anyway, I'll just leave that as a prompt for you to think about the importance of being nudged I think it's how we started this conversation. Exactly. Friends, Melanie's friends that are listening that to her back in the boardroom, those skills would be amazing. So is there a resource? I'm guessing it might be a book? Is there a resource you would like to suggest for the take on board community? There you can check out my book can be online. In gender equity and what organizations are up against, I actually just updated the cover with a shiny little metal graphic for the axiom awards that the 2022 awards for the world's best business book. So I was really excited to be able to put that on the cover. And then while I was added, I actually added some of my comics into the appendix of the book testing. Oh, we'll we'll put that on the show notes. So we'll put a link

to the book. Yeah. Yep. And to my comics, which you can find, again, on Instagram, or actually all the social media, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, I think just based on algorithms, it's easier to see them on LinkedIn, or my website. And we'll have the contact information for me as well. I respond to every message I get. I just love meeting new people. So feel free to reach out. Fantastic. I will also put the link we were talking just before we hit record about your podcast, which is also about the book and people reflecting on so we'll put the link to that in the show notes as well. If people want to listen to some of the concepts there as well.

Oh, Melanie, thank you such an interesting conversation and such a creative way of looking at some of the challenges that we experienced in the boardroom and some of the things that we should consider in the boardroom. So thank you so much for joining us here on the take on board podcast today.

Melanie Ho 26:10

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.